

Remarks by John Jakes
The Ohio State University
Commencement
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The Power of History

Dr. Gee -- distinguished faculty and
trustees -- graduates - parents and friends:

It is an honor to be asked to speak at
this commencement. I realized anew last Saturday
that Ohio State ranks in the major leagues of
spring graduations when I opened a letter from a
friend in Massachusetts who happens to be a
history professor. She sent me a clip from the
CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR listing a number of
commencement speakers, and there I was - just
above President Clinton and just below Kermit the
Frog. I leave it to you to determine the
significance of that placement.

I am doubly appreciative of the invitation
because I am not your typical commencement
speaker. As I observed at the Humanities
baccalaureate last year, I am not a corporation

president, political candidate, Wall Street tycoon, media mogul, Beltway pundit, or distinguished professor of anything. I am an English major who had plenty of luck in an occupation once described as second only in uncertainty to wrestling alligators. Just try to find good writing advice!

→ MAUGHAM ANECDOTE ←

First I want to congratulate all of you who are receiving degrees today -- and let me render appropriate homage to each parent who paid the bills. You graduates deserve the honors but they deserve a rest.

Your degree from Ohio State is very meaningful, because it is conferred by one of the world's great teaching and research institutions. It admits you to lifetime membership in a valuable network of friends and alumni that stretches around the world, into every field of human endeavor.

I must also say thanks to all those on the Commencement Speaker Search Committee. In 1953 and '54, when I was working on my Master's degree in the English department, I never imagined such a moment as this.

Back then I was making \$95-a-month as a teaching assistant. My wife was expecting our first child. We lived at 289 East 14th, in a big old house divided into flats. Our monthly entertainment budget was one dollar - two fifty cent admissions to a movie. Our first daughter was born in University Hospital, where the charge for OSU graduate students was - thankfully - just \$25 a day. What a pleasure to come back under vastly improved circumstances!

I spent a lot of time thinking about what I should say today. I know that it must be brief, though brevity isn't easy to achieve.

→ WILSON ANECDOTE ←

What I want to speak about is the power of history. Somewhere in the dark ages of my youth - probably in a public library - I fell in love with the past.

That doesn't mean I dislike the present, which I've written about, or the future, which I wrote about during the decade I was publishing science fiction.

No, somehow I just fell harder for the pageantry and drama of our collective past. I

began to read historical novels early. Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas, then great Americans such as Hervey Allen and Kenneth Roberts. A little later I discovered Samuel Eliot Morison and Douglass Southall Freeman and Bruce Catton, and I was hooked.

History was my avocation for a couple of decades before I successfully published historical novels. I continue to write them because I love doing it. Starting the study for each new novel is like enrolling in a completely new graduate school course.

But I'd still have my passion for history even if it didn't help me make a living. This is so because of history's relevance to our life. It has always been relevant and always will be. By looking at where we've been - what happened, what was good and what went wrong - we're better able to see where we're going, and change course. If we ignore our past, we endanger our future.

Thomas Jefferson is in my corner on this. In fact Jefferson believed that the "general education" of citizens should be, quote, "chiefly historical." He said, quote, "History, by apprising them of the past, will enable them to

judge of the future ... it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations ... it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men ...it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume and knowing it, to defeat its views."

"Ambition under every disguise ..." What a pertinent warning during our every-four-years extravaganza of half truths, negative attacks and sound bites - our presidential election. Of course big smears by ambitious candidates are nothing new. When Grover Cleveland ran for president, he was rumored to have an illegitimate child somewhere. His opponents cobbled up the following reminder -

"Ma, ma, where's my Pa?"

"Gone to the White House - ha, ha, ha!"

But if we can believe a survey done by the Gallup Poll a few years ago, Jefferson's message has been lost and forgotten by millions of people. When 700 seniors in colleges and universities were asked about U.S. history, the responses revealed these shockers:

- Forty-two percent couldn't place the Civil War in the correct half-century.
- Fifty-five percent couldn't identify the

Magna Carta.

- Twenty-three percent believed that Karl Marx's "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," is part of the U. S. Constitution!

What's the reason? Dull teaching, I suppose, and even duller textbooks. I've been asked three times to write a text with some life in it. Maybe someday I'll have the time and the courage to accept the challenge. I certainly believe that history is entertaining once you take it out of the embalming fluid.

But its real importance is the power to instruct, and in your busy life you should make it your business to know where you came from, so you'll be better prepared to say, "Hold it," when some bozo tries to lead you, your town, your state, or your nation down a wrong path.

Take the issue of censorship. History teaches us not to be too quick to condemn art that we don't immediately understand. Two of my favorites, the Impressionist painter Manet and the novelist Emile Zola were damned as pornographers by many of their contemporaries in 19th century France. I venture to say that the same self-

appointed critics would fall all over themselves today to hang an original Manet or shelve a Zola first edition.

When the Equal Rights Amendment was on the national agenda in the 'seventies I was in the middle of writing The Kent Family Chronicles - specifically the volumes dealing with the mid- to late nineteenth century. Some of the real heroines I discovered in my research were the proper but incredibly tough, and tough-minded women who were first on the barricades for woman suffrage. They took the vilest abuse and vilification and came back slugging for their cause.

Little Lucy Stone was about this high ... (5 FT). Stumping through the wilds of Nebraska in a wagon ...

→ **LUCY STONE ANECDOTE** ←

Listening to those who opposed the E.R.A. I was appalled because, a hundred and twenty years later, I was hearing the same anti-feminist arguments I read in speeches and newspaper articles from the 1850's! Nothing had changed! - including, alas, the ignorance of a segment of our population that did not realize it was being

worked over with shopworn rhetoric. Maybe if more voters had known more about the long, heroic fight of Lucy Stone and her sisters, the outcome for E.R.A. would have been different. I like to think so.

Another example - a catch phrase which I am afraid will be coming at us from all sides and all parts of the political spectrum this fall. "Family values."

Do you know of any sane and responsible person who is AGAINST family values? Who OPPOSES the idea that the family is the bulwark of society and should be strengthened by every legal means? I love the subject. I write sagas which are all about families - and their values.

The problem with the catchphrase is this. It can be used not only to build a positive awareness, but also to divide. It's a two-edged sword. In the 1920's and 30's in Germany, the National Socialist party - the Nazis - played many wildly emotional themes in their drive to dominate the country.

One of the most telling was the assertion that middle and working class families were under

savage attack - their sanctity and security threatened by everyone from gypsies and cabaret singers to international bankers and newspaper publishers. Particular targets were the Jewish-owned department stores, said to be ruthless and unfair competition for smaller mom-and-pop retail operations - many of them owned by bitter veterans of the defeated German army.

We know how this divisive tactic pitted German against German, Protestant and Catholic against Jew. We know the horrors that resulted.

Parallels between past and present are never exact, of course. Nor are they infallible predictors of the future. They are, however, invaluable cautionary tales for the thoughtful.

I do see a few indications that our eyes don't always glaze over at the mention of the word "history." One is the remarkable and unexpected success of A and E's new History Channel on cable. Its initial high ratings have confounded network executives who seem to think that all America wants to watch is an endless process of half-hour shows featuring laugh tracks and sex jokes.

I urge you graduates to devote some time in a busy life to a study of your past. Read about history. Think about what it teaches. I know you're tired of lessons, I was too when I got my B.A. and again when I finished my master's degree here. I know it's a complicated world that requires much of your time and attention simply to survive.

But I plead with you not to ignore the lessons of history as unimportant. They ARE important - unless you're willing to wake up some day having fallen into the same old traps, lured by the same old crowd of false prophets.

You deserve better. As Captain Picard of the starship "Enterprise" has remarked, you have the power to make it so. The power of history. Please use it - wisely.

IF WE IGNORE OUR PAST, WE ENDANGER OUR FUTURE.

Congratulations again. Thank you.

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